

**Testimony to the House of Representatives,
International Relations Committee,
Sub Committee on Europe and Emerging Threats
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by

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Mr. Chairman:

My name is Alexander Rondos. I am a former Ambassador of Greece and have been closely involved with Balkan politics for the last eight years. I was also a member of the International Commission on the Balkans. I am very pleased to have this opportunity to testify on Serbia before the Sub-Committee on Europe and Emerging Threats.

Your hearing is timely. The course of political events in Serbia in the next year can have a decisive effect both for the future of the country and for the stability of the Balkans.

- Serbia must have elections in the next twelve months. It will certainly have them sooner. In these elections there will be a stark choice between those who want to build on and complete the work of market and democratic reform that began in 2000 with the overthrow of Milosevic and those who were collaborators of Milosevic whose intentions are still shrouded in nationalist rhetoric.
- Serbia will either keep a coalition of political forces that will continue the push towards transparent market reform and prepare the country for membership of the European Union, or it will give way to those forces that want to restore the privileges they enjoyed during the years of isolation under Milosevic.
- Serbia will have been given serious cause for optimism by the European Union that its candidacy might be possible or it will be left as a European

afterthought, confirming to some in Serbia that the West is not to be taken seriously.

- Serbia will be confronted by the decision on the status of Kosovo. If that decision is taken by the international community before elections, it will be very difficult to hold off the assault of those in Serbia who say that the democratic forces simply gave in and surrendered Serbia's Jerusalem.

We therefore have a choice, as members of the international community, to decide to take the strategic high road and argue that the primary goal is to secure Serbian democracy, ensure security in Kosovo and stability in a still fragile region. The cornerstone of Serbian democracy is the guarantor for satisfactory settlement on Kosovo and for stability in the region. Such a roadmap for Balkan success would culminate with the European Union giving assurances that Serbia would become a candidate of the Union, perhaps in late 2007. If we believe that this is the path to follow, then we have to be very careful about how these external issues like Kosovo will influence the choices Serbs make in their elections.

The alternative is to argue that the Serbs mortgaged themselves morally with Milosevic and that they have not paid their mortgage off. This means going ahead immediately with some solution on Kosovo and allowing the European Union to procrastinate and prevaricate over Serbia's future role in Europe. As far elections are concerned, Serbs would be informed that they are welcome to have them whenever they want and the international community will follow its own timetable for Kosovo.

I happen to believe that the first option is the wise way to go. I fear that I am in a minority and that the fate of Serbia may be decided by external influences that are guided by indifference, impatience and perhaps a touch of vindictiveness.

I chose to be with you to ring an alarm bell. I believe that it is in our collective strategic interests to do what is necessary to help the Serbian nation complete the work it has begun in building a thriving democracy. When you have friends who want to stand up and be counted with you as part of the family of democratic nations, then it is also our obligation to stand by them. If we do not, then surely we have no reason to complain when they turn their backs on us and dismiss us as moral and political gadflies. We have an opportunity to be serious in our efforts to work with Serbia and I believe that Serbia is ready to reciprocate. Above all, a little vision could take us a long way to success.

The domestic political choice in Serbia is between the parties that struggled to bring democracy to Serbia and those that collaborated with Milosevic. It is a choice between a Western orientation of the economic, political and defence alliance, and, one that is much more suspicious of the benefits that such alliances can bring. It will be a choice between one group of parties that have yet to make themselves over from the past and those that are shaping to be the forces for the future. It will be a choice between a more competitive, modernised economy and one that – in the absence of a clear opposition platform – will try to reward those who feel they have been excluded from the benefits of the last few years of democratic life and economic growth.

These choices are common to most societies in transition from the communist period. I would like to focus on the variables that are uniquely Serbian and often easily misunderstood outside of Serbia.

I would like to reduce these briefly to the following:

- a. The shape of Serbia's economy;
- b. The shape of democratic life;
- c. The shape of Serbia's territory
- d. Serbia's place in the world.

Given that Serbia was economically isolated by sanctions for close to a decade, it is remarkable how the country has succeeded in bring back some balance to economic life. Monetary stability is in stark contrast to the spiraling inflation of the 1990s. The banking sector is expanding impressively. Recent privatizations have added new revenue to the budget and turned almost 75 percent of the former socially owned enterprises into private ownership. Foreign investors have been important contributors to the process. The macro-economic indicators, in short, are impressive. Now Serbia faces the task of building a thriving economy that can expand employment opportunities while lifting living standards. In my view, the democratic governments that succeeded the Milosevic era have exercised economic management with considerable wisdom, leaving it in the hands of an impressive group of technocrats who have imposed economic discipline while also disciplining expectations. Continuity is in Serbia's interests.

Democratic life in Serbia is healthy. It does not fit the classic patterns of Left versus Right. The parties that assumed power upon the overthrow of Milosevic are clearly in opposition to those parties, like the Radicals (SRS) and the Socialists (SPS) that collaborated with Milosevic. A victory by the Radical Party would not cripple democracy. The trappings of democratic life will remain. The threat lies elsewhere. We have seen in other parts of the post-communist world, a roll back from the initial gains of democratic politics and a return to power of people who exude nostalgia and a contempt for the spirit of democracy. What is at risk in Serbia is that these parties of the past have yet to demonstrate that they have moved beyond the politics of isolation and resentment. Until they do so, they will infect the political life with the politics of injured national pride and vindictiveness rather than the politics of openness and patriotic self-respect.

This prompts some reflection on the third issue. Either before or after its elections Serbia will be confronted by a very difficult choice regarding the status of Kosovo. I hope that this occurs after the election when a government with a fresh mandate can finalise the negotiations and proceed to the next stage of national life, whatever that may be. Already this year, Serbia has had to handle the separation with Montenegro.

Why is this issue of Kosovo so important and not to be under-estimated nor misunderstood? There are rational arguments and then there are – to the secular westerner – the irrational. Both views command respect. The rational view asks whether Serbia really wants to have a territory 90 percent of which is populated by an Albanian population that is growing demographically at a dramatically high rate. Do these two

people really want to live together? Does Serbia want to have the financial and political responsibility for this Albanian population? Will Albanians participate in the elections in Serbia?

But there is a powerful emotional counterpoint. Kosovo is at the heart of Serbia's historical identity. There may be quite a number of Serbs who do not feel this affinity to Kosovo. There are also many for whom it matters. Serbia is not alone having its Jerusalem as an issue that has deep emotional affinity that translates into politics. I can only think of my own country, Greece where many have the profoundest feeling for what we call our lost motherlands. I will not hide my own sorrow that I am unable to attend liturgy in my own Mother Church, Aghia Sofia, in what is now Istanbul. I am required to pay to visit a museum that was once a mosque after it was desecrated. I can only imagine that for many Jews the issue of Jerusalem has an equally profound pull. These are not issues to be dismissed lightly. In a world where secularism is still so fashionable – and passes as modernism – the risk of misunderstanding the attraction of those unquantifiable symbols that bind a people can be fatal. The desecration of countless Churches in Kosovo since 1999, when the administration of Kosovo passed to the international community, merely adds to the suspicions for many in Serbian politics that part of the national heritage is being deliberately sold away, literally, and that the cradle of its faith is being lost.

Thus, the electoral nightmare for Serbia would be a decision on Kosovo, before the elections, which would possibly result in Serbs fleeing from Kosovo and the belief,

manipulated by many politicians, that the Serbian government had failed to strike an honorable bargain with an international community intent on appeasing the Albanian population and its well publicized threats of violence.

In short, the risk we run is that the electoral fate of those who want to consolidate democracy in Serbia risks being sacrificed to appease who threaten violence.

My fourth point concerns Serbia's place in the world. Were it not for Kosovo, the need to render Ratko Mladic to the Hague and the protracted decision over Montenegro's fate, I firmly believe that Serbia would already be a candidate member of the European Union. The negotiations with the EU are currently stalled over the EU insistence that Serbia demonstrate that it is doing everything to deliver Mladic. The result is that the international community has trapped itself and Serbia. While wanting and needing Serbia the country is being isolated. Little wonder that those who are nostalgic for the past now ask what has been the point of even opening up to the West.

A mere look at the map of Europe and the potential of Serbia should be enough to explain why Serbia should be in the European Union. What I worry about is whether the European Union is willing to engage in the type of strategy that will give Serbia the prospect to show its electorate that the EU is a possibility and not a pipe-dream.

I will conclude by repeating the opening vision. A strategy in which the European Union offers a framework and a future for the Balkans would allow the negotiations on Kosovo

to come to a natural conclusion, when a new democratic government is installed in Belgrade. Interim arrangements can be made to begin the already much delayed implementation of agreements among Serbs and Albanians. This would provide the confidence to allow for security to prevail in Kosovo. With these elements in hand, it is possible to envision a Serbia actively contributing to the stability of the whole region and a Kosovo no longer in an existential limbo, developing the instruments of statehood and law and order, and, progressing towards prosperity.

I hope that we will all have the wisdom to be patient in order to gain a greater good for all..

Thank you.